Review of Rabbi Marc D. Angel's New Book: The Wisdom of Solomon and Us

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The Wisdom of Solomon and Us
The Quest for Meaning, Morality and a Deeper Relationship with God
By Rabbi Dr. Marc D. Angel
Jewish Lights Publishing, 2016, 204 pages
Reviewed by Rabbi Dr. Israel Drazin

The Bible describes God granting King Solomon the gift of wisdom. As a result, a tradition ascribes the authorship of the three biblical books Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, and Song of Songs to King Solomon. Each contains wisdom, but each has a different tone and style. Ecclesiastes is philosophical and cynical, Proverbs speaks of proper behavior in pithy statements, Song of Songs is a lyrical love poem. Another tradition states that Solomon wrote the three books at different life stages prompted by his thinking and needs at each stage. He composed the

love poems in his youth, he focused on behavior in his maturity, and in his old age he became cynical and derided the vanity of luxuries in his Ecclesiastes.

Marc Angel is the founder and director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals (jewishideas.org), which offers intelligent and informative weekly articles, publishes books, arranges lectures, and more. He is the past president of the Rabbinical Council of America. In his new book, he suggests that the sixteenth century Rabbi Moshe Almosnino of Salonica's order is more realistic than the traditional one. Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes as a young man when he was searching for truth and life's meaning. As a king in his middle years, seeking to improve his people's behavior, he wrote Proverbs for them. When he attained old age, he wrote a love poem, which the second century sage Rabbi Akiva described as "holy of holies," and said it is a metaphorical yearning for the love of God. Rabbi Angel orders his penetrating comments on these three books of wisdom in the Salonica rabbi's order.

He gives readers 67 short essays, most with interesting, heart-warming stories, on how Solomon's ancient wisdom can be used beneficially by people today. He offers insightful thoughts by Jewish and non-Jewish thinkers – such as Herman Melville of Moby Dick fame, the anthropologist Margaret Meade, Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik, and many more that bring the chapters' lessons to life – always within the framework of rabbinic tradition.

For example, he explains that the rabbinic sages included the skeptical Ecclesiastes in the Bible to make "a tremendously important lesson: honest questioning is a legitimate aspect of religious life." He answers the oft-asked question: "Does any human life really matter in the overall scheme of things." He quotes the novelist Peter De Vries: "that you can't go home again is a truth inseparably linked to the fact that neither can you ever get away from it." He discusses Immanuel Kant's claim: "Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing is ever made." He notes that a wit once commented that people seek longevity even though they don't know what to do with themselves on a rainy Sunday afternoon. He wonders why it is that the United States that represents only five percent of the world's population has 62 percent of the world's school and workplace shooters.

Religion, he states, is at its best when it contributes to our sense of happiness and well-being. It isn't wrong to eat, drink, and be merry, but it is wrong to overindulge. Maimonides wrote that joyous festivals are indispensable for people. Yet, psychologist David Myers found that although physical conditions in America have improved dramatically over the past decades, Americans are not happier.

People approach religion and its celebrations improperly. August Strindberg wrote in his play The Father: “It is strange that as soon as you begin to talk about God and love, your voice becomes hard and your eyes full of hate.”

A Catholic student once observed that God shows us the obstacles in life, but does not tell us how to overcome them. However, God teaches us how to learn. Solomon, as interpreted by Angel, tells us how to deal with life’s problems and be happy. He mines the books of wisdom and shows how Ecclesiastes helps us understand life’s meaning and mission, how Proverbs teaches the maintenance of a healthy society, and how Song of Songs can aid us in achieving a soul-satisfying relationship with God.

God gave Solomon wisdom and he shared it with us. We can all learn much from that ancient wisdom, as Rabbi Angel has applied it to modern day life.